

Japanese New Year's Eve "Ōmisoka": Traditions of cleansing and welcoming the New Year

Japanese Traditions, Rituals, and Customs In Preparation for the New Year

As the year draws to a close, you can sense a change in the air in Japan. It's the time of the year when many homes and businesses start to wind down. For many Japanese (or Japanese-identifying) individuals, the end of the year and the welcoming of the New Year hold significant cultural and personal importance. They are one of the most meaningful moments of the year.

Ōmisoka, a cherished Japanese tradition that signifies the shift from the old year to the new, takes place on 31st of December and has deep connections to the nation's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Its origins can be traced to a blend of Shinto and Buddhist customs and beliefs. Although Omisoka is celebrated on the last day of the year, it would be neglectful not to explain the customs, history, and beliefs that make the end-of-the-year period so important for Japanese people.

Most households prepare for this last day of the year around mid-December. Many start to feel the need to thoroughly clean their homes (called "Ōsoji" or "big cleaning") from top to bottom. Ōsoji is done to cleanse and purify the living environment to welcome the fresh New Year and serves as a reminder to declutter one's life, leaving space for new experiences, growth, and positivity to flourish. This ritual allows one to bid farewell to the past year's negativity, welcoming renewal opportunities.

Image caption: Kadomatsu: Japanese New Year decoration symbolizing prosperity and ancestral spirits.

Most notably in the Shinto religion, this "big cleaning" was, and still is, for some Japanese households to welcome the "Toshigami-sama," or the god/deity of abundant harvests (specifically of grain or rice). Traditionally, Japanese people believed that



creating an inviting and clean home for the Toshigami-sama would bring good fortune, energy, spirit, and abundance in the New Year. *Pix*

Another important tradition that follows the thorough cleaning of one's house in preparation for Ōmisoka is to place decorations outside the house around the front porch or door called "kadomatsu." Kadomatsu is made from pine branches and bamboo. Kadomatsu serves as a welcoming abode for the gods during New Year's Day and for a few days or weeks after that, provided the household has performed the New Year's welcoming rituals to make the deities feel invited and comfortable.



Image caption: Kagami-mochi: Symbolizes good fortune made from stacked rice cakes where the two rice cakes represent the past and the future.

Another decoration along this line to entice and honor the Toshigami-sama is made of rope and paper with auspicious symbols. This decoration is placed over doorways to welcome the deities into the house. In addition, many homes in Japan and among those identifying as Japanese may prepare "kagami-mochi," a decoration made from two round rice cakes (mochi) stacked on each other. A small tangerine fruit, "dai-dai," may be placed on top of the kagami-mochi and is said to contain the spirit of Toshigami-sama.

At the stroke of midnight on Ōmisoka, Buddhist temples resonate with the sound of bells being rung 108 times, echoing ancient beliefs. According to Buddhist teachings, this midnight bell ringing, "Joya no Kane," represents the 108 human desires and attachments that perpetuate suffering. The practice encourages Japanese people to contemplate their desires, fostering mindfulness and the quest for a more harmonious existence.



Image caption: Joya no Kane “Midnight bell”: An annual ringing of bells on New Year’s Eve at temples in Japan.

Traditional Japanese New Year's Eve Food Customs and Rituals

As for food, Japanese people traditionally enjoy "toshikoshi soba" (year-passing soba noodles) on Ōmisoka. Beyond its delectable taste, soba holds a more profound symbolism. Soba, or buckwheat noodles, represent strength and resilience, mirroring one's hopes for a prosperous year. Japanese people believe that this soba noodle dish on Ōmisoka promises a long and healthy life as they embrace a philosophy that encourages one to nourish the body and spirit. This soup noodle dish is traditionally enjoyed warm, with toppings such as tempura vegetables or protein with scallion and nori (dried sea vegetables used in other dishes such as sushi). This culinary tradition often accompanies watching special New Year's Eve

programs on TV with the family, such as the renowned "Kohaku" song competition, which traditionally features two teams, red and white.

Image caption: Osechi-ryori: An artful feast of tradition, symbolism, and flavor to welcome the New Year.

Also, Ōmisoka can be very busy for some households preparing "osechi-ryori." Traditionally, Japanese people prepare "osechi-ryori," which is a variety of dishes made in advance during the end of the year (usually the last 2-3 days of the year) so women can rest and not cook for the first three or so days of the New Year and rest and enjoy this purposeful holiday season. Osechi-ryori is presented in multi-tiered lacquer boxes (2-3 layers) adorned with beautiful artwork on the outside. The multi-layers symbolize the continuous flow of happiness, wealth, health, and abundance, mirroring the lacquer boxes. In more recent times, many grocery stores, department stores, and restaurants sell pre-made "osechi-ryori" for consumers to purchase. Many young families nowadays don't have the time to cook or the knowledge/skills to do so. Also, some Japanese people opt out of eating this type of traditional dish altogether.



Fun Fact: Did you know that slurping your soba noodles in Japan is considered a sign of appreciation and enjoyment? It's a delightful reminder that eating should be a pleasurable experience, free from rigid rules.

Some considerations nutrition and dietetic professionals should know about clients/patients celebrating Ōmisoka (or other culturally significant moments)

1. Cultural awareness and interest: Recognize and respect the cultural significance of Ōmisoka for your client. Show interest and respect in learning about Japanese cultural traditions, foods, and experiences, particularly around this most significant time of the year for many Japanese clients. If you have clients who are Japanese or a family member with a Japanese background, spend some time looking up end-of-

year and New Year customs and traditions before your appointment so that you can better understand the potential significance of this holiday for your clients and be able to engage and support in a meaningful and mindful way.

2. Have open conversations and have curiosity: Create an inviting and safe space for your clients to discuss the cultural significance and importance of food and lifestyle preferences and traditions that are important to them, such as celebrating or getting ready for Ōmisoka or preparing the meals that are important to them. Some questions you might like to ask are:

- *"What are some of your favorite traditional foods or dishes that you look forward to enjoying during Ōmisoka?"*
- *"Can you describe any specific customs or rituals that you or your family (or community) follow during Ōmisoka, and how do they contribute to your overall celebration of this holiday?"*
- *"Are there any specific challenges or concerns you encounter in maintaining your dietary and lifestyle goals during Ōmisoka since this time of the year may be a significant time for you/your family?"*
- *"Are there any health or dietary goals you would like to achieve during or after Ōmisoka, and how can I support you in reaching those goals while respecting our cultural values?"*

3. Remember to individualize your approach: Tailor your recommendations to our client's unique preferences and dietary needs. Acknowledge that there may be variations on how the end of the year and New Year's rituals and customs are celebrated among Japanese individuals and families. Some Japanese people, at times, due to past painful experiences or trauma of racism and/or being seen as the "other", may wish to follow more "American" or "Westernized" end-of-year and New Years rituals or customs. When this occurs, ask curious and safe questions to explore what may connect the patient to feel they belong and are connected through their food, meals, and customs to support their healing journey to find what works best for them. Holiday times can be particularly emotional, painful, and sensitive for many.

4. Respect cultural traditions: Show respect for traditions such as osechi-ryori to allow women to rest and enjoy the holiday. Be sensitive to the cultural significance of this practice and its role, for example, in family dynamics and nutritional enjoyment or balance. Staying engaged and being mindful of the significance of this holiday for

the clients can enhance nutrition education sessions focused on addressing their dietary and health needs while respecting their cultural traditions.

5. Cultural exchange: Encourage your clients to share their Ōmisoka traditions and their favorite dishes with you. This fosters a collaborative relationship where you and your clients can learn from each other's cultural experiences.

Ōmisoka represents a multifaceted celebration of great importance for Japanese people. It encourages a mindful approach to their customs that are deeply enriched with cultural and historical significance. As clients engage in these time-honored traditions, they naturally focus on appreciation, reflection, and connection. Through this, they deepen their understanding not only of the celebration itself but also of their cultural heritage. It inspires Japanese people (and those who enjoy honoring Japanese traditions!) to step into the new year with hearts filled with gratitude and minds attuned to mindfulness.

**Illustrations by Reiko Miyazawa, sister of Sahra Pak. Reiko lives in Melbourne, Australia, with her husband and her two recently adopted feline kids. She draws, paints, and makes art from her heritage and heart.*

Toshikoshi Soba (New Year's Japanese Soba) Recipe

Toshikoshi Soba, a beloved Japanese New Year's dish, offers a warm and delicious way to celebrate the transition into the new year. This comforting bowl of soba noodles in a flavorful broth, topped with an array of beautiful vegetables, is a delightful tradition that brings friends and family together for a tasty and healthful start to the year.



Ingredients:

For the Broth:

- 8 cups water
- 1 piece of kombu (dried kelp, about 6 inches - if you can't find this you can substitute with wakame or use Ajinomoto/MSG)**
- 4 dried shiitake mushrooms
- 1/2 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup mirin
- 2 tablespoons sake

For the Toppings:

- 12-16 ounces dried soba noodles (100% buckwheat if you can find it)
- 2 cups sliced green onions (scallions)
- 1 sheet of nori (seaweed), toasted and cut into thin strips
- 1 cup firm tofu, cubed and pan-fried

For Vegan Tempura Vegetables (Option 1):

- 2 cups assorted vegetables (e.g., broccoli florets, bell pepper strips, zucchini, and sweet potato), cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup ice-cold sparkling water
- Vegetable oil for frying

For Blanched Vegetables (Option 2):

- 2 cups assorted vegetables (e.g., broccoli florets, bell pepper strips, zucchini, and sweet potato), cut into bite-sized pieces
- Salt for blanching

For Garnish:

- 1/2 cup grated daikon radish
- Shichimi togarashi (Japanese seven-spice blend) for garnish (optional)

Instructions:

Prepare the Broth:

- In a large pot, add the water, kombu, and dried shiitake mushrooms. Let it soak for 30 minutes.
- Place the pot over medium heat and slowly bring it to a simmer. Just before it boils, remove the kombu and shiitake mushrooms.

Add Flavor to the Broth:

- Stir in the soy sauce, mirin, and sake. Let the broth simmer for another 10-15 minutes to meld the flavors. Taste and adjust the seasoning if needed.

Cook the Soba Noodles:

- While the broth is simmering, bring a separate pot of water to a boil. Cook the soba noodles according to the package instructions (usually around 4-5 minutes). Drain and rinse them under cold water to remove excess starch. Set aside.

Prepare the Tofu:

- Heat a non-stick skillet over medium-high heat and add a little oil. Pan-fry the tofu cubes until they are golden brown on all sides. Set aside.

Option 1: Make Vegan Tempura Vegetables (Crispy)

- In a mixing bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and salt. Gradually whisk in the ice-cold sparkling water until you have a smooth batter.
- Heat vegetable oil in a skillet or deep pan to 350°F (175°C).
- Dip the assorted vegetable pieces into the tempura batter and gently place them into the hot oil. Fry until they are crispy and golden brown, turning as needed. Remove and place them on paper towels to drain excess oil.

Option 2: Blanch Vegetables (Light and Crisp)

- In a large pot of boiling water, add a pinch of salt and blanch the assorted vegetable pieces for about 1-2 minutes or until they are bright and slightly tender. Immediately transfer them to a bowl of ice water to stop the cooking process. Drain and set aside.

Assemble the Toshikoshi Soba:

- Divide the cooked soba noodles among 4 serving bowls.

Ladle the Hot Broth:

- Pour the hot broth over the soba noodles in each bowl. Ensure the broth covers the noodles entirely.

Add Toppings:

- Garnish each bowl with sliced green onions, toasted nori strips, pan-fried tofu cubes, and your choice of either vegan tempura vegetables or blanched vegetables.

Serve and Customize:

- Place grated daikon radish on the side, allowing diners to add it to their soba as they like.
- Optionally, offer shichimi togarashi for those who enjoy a bit of spice.

Enjoy Your Vegan Toshikoshi Soba:

- Serve immediately while the broth and noodles are hot. The noodles soak up the broth quickly, so make sure everyone is ready to dive in. *Itadaki-masu!* (“Enjoy!” in Japanese)

***Some [interesting facts](#) and unfortunate [history behind MSG](#).*

References:

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